



Cuadernos de Investigación UNED

ISSN: 1659-4266

ISSN: 1659-441X

Universidad Estatal a Distancia de Costa Rica

Slocum, Sophia

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Cuadernos de Investigación UNED, vol. 10, no. 1, 2018, pp. 110-113

Universidad Estatal a Distancia de Costa Rica

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22458/urj.v10i1.2009>

Available in: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=515661440002>

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## Employment opportunities for people with disabilities in Alajuela, Costa Rica

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Received 23-V-2017 • Corrected 21-VIII-2017 • Accepted 06-IX-2017

**ABSTRACT:** There are over 400 000 people with disabilities in Costa Rica, but there is almost no published research on their employment. To identify employment opportunities, I interviewed 23 participants in the training program of a foundation in Alajuela, Costa Rica (students, professors and mothers). I found that they have insufficient opportunities because of social attitudes and communication barriers, often limiting them to entry-level and low paying jobs.

**Key words:** People with disabilities, employment, Costa Rica, opportunities

**RESUMEN:** Oportunidades de empleo para personas con discapacidad en Alajuela, Costa Rica. Hay más de 400 000 personas con discapacidad en Costa Rica, pero casi no hay investigaciones publicadas sobre su empleo. Para identificar las oportunidades de empleo, entrevisté a 23 participantes en el programa de capacitación de una fundación en Alajuela, Costa Rica (estudiantes, profesores y madres). Encontré que tienen oportunidades insuficientes debido a las actitudes sociales y las barreras de comunicación, a menudo limitándolos a los puestos de nivel de entrada y bajos salarios.

**Palabras clave:** personas con discapacidad, desempleo, Costa Rica, oportunidades

In the job market, people with disabilities suffer significant discrimination. Applicants without a disability are 1.78 times more likely to be called back for a job interview (Ravaud, Madiot & Ville, 1992). Workers with a disability have double chance of working in part-time and contingent jobs, which offer less pay (Schur, 2003). A key factor in employment opportunities is public attitude toward people with disabilities (Shier, Graham & Jones, 2009).

Much literature leaves out the voices of people with disabilities, despite the importance of their opinions (Shier, Graham & Jones, 2009), but we know that they often have a positive outlook on their chances of finding a job, yet they are not likely to work in anything other than manual and entry level/low skill jobs (Meager, Bates, Dench, Honey & Williams, 1998). In addition, there is still a strong social stigma resulting in prejudice for people

with disabilities (Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, & Knott, 2006). Because of these issues, people with disabilities are still fighting for true equality in the job force and other parts of life.

As of 2015, there are 452 849 people with disabilities in Costa Rica. This is 10.5% of the population; however, only 42% of these people between the ages of 15-35 (the most productive age group in the work force) are employed (MTSS, MEP & INA, 2014). The most relevant government program in Costa Rica is the Ministerio de Educación Pública (MEP), with a branch titled Centros de Atención Integral para Personas Adultas con Discapacidad (CAIPAD). This branch works directly to educate people with disabilities over the age of 21, developing labor skills, and employability (Ministerio de Educación Pública de Costa Rica, 2017). There have been laws in Costa Rica

pertaining to people with disabilities since 1957, with one of the most notable being law #8661, passed in 2008. It states people with disabilities can participate fully in society, meaning they have equal opportunities to employment (Asamblea Legislativa de Costa Rica, 2008). Despite laws guaranteeing equal rights for people with disabilities and increased awareness and acceptance of disabilities, there still remain barriers. The government of Costa Rica has not allocated adequate funds toward agencies that provide education and opportunities for this population of people (Litvinov, 2016).

Previous research on the employment opportunities for people with disabilities in Costa Rica is virtually nonexistent. Here I report on the employment opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities at the Fundación Servio Flores Arroyo (FSFA) in Alajuela, Costa Rica.

## METHODS

**Participants:** The overall sample was 23 voluntary participants: 12 students at FSFA, 8 professors, and 3 mothers of students interviewed. Of the students, 7 were males and 5 female, while there were 7 female professors and 1 male. Each participant was associated with FSFA and was selected by the director. Because this study is exploratory and qualitative, no participants were randomly selected, and the sample is not large or varied enough to be representative beyond FSFA. However, due to insufficient studies on this topic, this research is justified despite not being generalizable.

**Measures:** In order to complete this study, three different interviews were created for the samples studied: students, professors, and parents. Every question was either open-ended, had a Yes/No option and space for commentary, or a scale of 1-5. Each interview also included a demographics section with the variables of age, gender, residence, time with the institute, and occupation if applicable (Fig. 1 in Digital Appendix).

A printed copy of the purpose of the study and the informed consent were given to each participant. Each participant then had an individual interview, either in person or via telephone. All the interviews were conducted in Spanish and then translated to English.

**Procedures:** The procedure for each sample of the study varied. For the students, permission was obtained from each professor, and then the student was pulled individually from class at FSFA for a period of 10-20 minutes.

Students were given a printed copy of the informed consent and purpose of study and had their participants' rights explained as necessary. Once consent was given, the demographics were collected and the interviews were conducted.

The professors were given their interviews in the form of a survey since they could not leave classes to participate in interviews. The researcher interviewed two of the mothers by phone, and the third in person.

## RESULTS

The first objective of this study was to characterize the labor skills people with intellectual disabilities can learn. All three samples mentioned cooking and baking skills, personal presentation, and communication as relevant skills the students are learning. The students reported more physical skills, while the professors and parents made sure to highlight cognitive skills, such as respect and development.

The second objective was to identify employment opportunities. Almost half the students believed they had the same opportunities as people without a disability, quoting the idea that everybody in Costa Rica is equal (Fig. 2 in Digital Appendix).

Half of this sample of students has worked in the past, while a quarter is currently working. Many of these jobs have been temporary and all have been low hours without benefits. The employers cited by all three samples offer mostly part time, entry-level positions that probably would not provide a living wage. In addition, if FSFA had to close down, 11/12 students believe they would have to return to their homes because they had nowhere else to study or work. The parents and professors overwhelmingly agreed with this statement.

Both the mothers and professors recommended not overprotecting the students, but rather developing their independence and autonomy. The parents want FSFA to have more communication with businesses, while FSFA would like the parents to play a larger role in the job search and insertion process (Fig. 3 in Digital Appendix). Direct personal support was also identified as being the most important type of support for the students.

Over half of the parents and professors stated that the government does not adequately support people with disabilities and their families, either financially or socially. Comments varied significantly: some families who do receive a pension are satisfied; some say the laws are only theory and not actual reality; some report a lack of follow up and little enforcement of equal-opportunity laws.

The third objective of this study pertains to the barriers people with disabilities face. The parents and professors all agreed that there are prejudices toward people with disabilities. The professors were divided on the strength of these prejudices, but all the parents agreed that social stigmas were incredibly strong, ranking at five on a one to five scale.

Professors felt the most significant problem is students being treated as children. This can manifest in many forms, including people talking down to those with disabilities, bosses not giving adequate directions for completing job tasks, or people feeling pity towards people with disabilities. The parents agreed with the professors, and also cited public transportation as another significant problem (Fig. 4 in Digital Appendix). Additionally, parents reported that students are given fewer opportunities because there is little trust in their abilities to do a job correctly (Fig. 5 in Digital Appendix). While each sample overwhelmingly said that the students can take public transportation alone in order to get to a job, between 8-33% of the participants acknowledged the difficulty of doing so with a physical disability.

Social attitudes were the most significant barrier for students and professors, while parents felt communication was the most significant (Fig. 6 in Digital Appendix). Students reported perceived attitudes from others of annoyance, impatience, and fear. Comments were collected to review the most significant problems the students face (Fig. 7 in Digital Appendix).

## DISCUSSION

For the labor skills objective, students valuing manual skills is consistent with the *Department of Education Employment* study, which stated that people with disabilities are more likely to work in manual, low level jobs (Meager, Bates, Dench, Honey & Williams, 1998).

The second objective regarding employment opportunities also supported previous literature. People with disabilities had a positive outlook for their employment opportunities despite each parent having a negative outlook (Meager, Bates, Dench, Honey, & Williams 1998). This indicates that the message of equal opportunity is not being realized in practice.

The sample from this study had fewer students working than the national average of 42%. The study from *Industrial Researchers* notes over half the jobs held by people with disabilities are entry-level positions (Schur, 2003); thus, finding living-wage jobs is an additional challenge. The participants do not believe there is sufficient access to jobs because they would not be working

if there were no FSFA. Statistically, the students in this sample have not had the same employment opportunities as people without disabilities.

While laws are an important step toward equality, the families of people with disabilities do not feel the government is supporting them in reality. Perhaps enough organizations, such as CAIPAD, do exist within the government, but their work needs to be more efficient and impactful.

Special attention should be paid to what the students feel are their greatest barriers, as they are the ones directly facing them. With attitudes being the largest barrier for them, they feel there are social stigmas hurting their chances of employment (Ravaud, Madiot & Ville, 1992). If the students are not feeling socially supported, they may also be feeling there is little support to help them find jobs and stay employed.

There were limitations to this study: the researcher is not fluent in Spanish; some students had difficulty understanding questions; and only three parents participated. While limited, this study shows that much more can be done to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities in Alajuela.

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See Digital Appendix at: / Ver Apéndice digital en: <http://investiga.uned.ac.cr/revistas/index.php/cuadernos>